

ADVENT 2: A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Aim: To show my hearers that despite political and religious leadership God's Word comes with life-changing power, and through John the Baptist the way was prepared for the coming of the Lord.

One of the successful TV contest shows of the last few years has been "The Voice." Top singers who are judges and coaches have to listen with their backs to the contestants to decide whether or not the singer will be part of their team, and hopefully win the competition. Only after they have decided to choose them will they hit their buzzer and their chair turn round and they see the singer face to face. The voice is faceless – until that moment.

John the Baptist was the Voice in the wilderness, the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, that someone would come to prepare the way of the Lord. He didn't draw much attention to himself, as he was more concerned people would listen to the one who came after him, and for whom he was the forerunner. When he began his ministry it was at the end of nearly four hundred years of longing. Imagine, in Israel they had not had a prophet since 1600, if we were calculating to our present day. 400 years silence.

SO what do we know about this voice from our gospel reading?

Firstly there is the context of the voice. Luke 3:1-2 sets the political and religious context when the voice was speaking. Luke is the only gospel writer to describe clearly when John the Baptist's ministry was, and also therefore when Jesus ministry began. It was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. That makes it 28-29AD. Tiberius was the Emperor in Rome after Augustus, but who by this time had retreated to his island palace on Capri, where there was a steep cliff, where rumour had it he had anyone he didn't agree with thrown off.

And the voice also spoke when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, living in his base at Caesarea Maritima, on the coast of Judea in the Mediterranean, who for a long time was not assumed to be real by those who doubted scripture, until a large inscription with his name on was found at Caesarea, and that showed he had built Caesarea in honour of Tiberius. Herod was tetrarch – that is one of the four rulers – of Galilee, Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, modern day Syria and northern Jordan, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in northern Syria and Lebanon. These were three sons of Herod the Great who had disputed their father's will, so got just a part of his kingdom each, but the underlying motifs are jealousy, bitterness and humiliation in the pursuit of power. And then there is the religious leadership, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, though there could only be one at a time, suggesting this means one was a bit like a former high-priest who kept his title, like former US presidents do today. But if you had been reading the Judean Times 2000 years ago you would really have thought these men were all the ones in whom power resided; the movers and shakers in ancient Judea.

[The context of the voice](#). But then we have [the location of the voice](#).

Because into this political and religious mix comes the word of the Lord. It came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Let's just pause there. Someone has said that the importance of this is like saying: When Jo Biden was President of the United States, Boris Johnson was Prime Minister of UK, Xi Jingping was president of the People's Republic of China, Nicola Sturgeon was First Minister of Scotland, Emmanuel Macron was President of France, Justin Welby was Archbishop of Canterbury, and Stephen Cotterell was Archbishop of York, the word of the Lord came to John Smith who was vicar of St. Muggles in the Marsh....Just think about it. Who today talks about the

impact of emperor Tiberius, or Pontius Pilate or these other tetrarchs, or even religious leaders, on the world, except historians, or theologians. These historical figures are largely forgotten...but the message of the voice has echoed throughout the centuries, because he came to prepare the way. What a wonderful encouragement when we feel our impact on world history seems limited. What changes world history, is the word of the Lord! When God speaks, through his mouthpieces, the prophets, things come into being. The voice, we know, was John the Baptist, but it was the message he brought that was the vital preparation for the Lord. And where was the voice located? **In the wilderness!** If you were running a promotional campaign with high media and comms input you would not choose the desert as the place to launch your message because no one was likely to turn up! The wilderness was the place people feared; the place they avoided as the home of wild animals, bandits and danger! But the message is so powerful that people walk into the desert to hear the voice!

Sometimes we think we will only hear God in places like churches, or cathedrals – and I hope we do, but often we don't expect to hear him in places that feel barren or spiritually dead, or in places that are hostile to God. But here in the wilderness the word of the Lord comes through the voice. Is there somewhere in our lives where we feel we are in a desert, which feels lifeless, where we just see danger, or feel hopeless? Maybe God wants to speak to us, is speaking to us, in that barren place? A difficult marriage, a hard place of work, a lonely bedsit, a hostile neighbour. The power to change the world was not in the political or religious corridors of power in Rome or Jerusalem, but in the last place imaginable – the desert, where other distractions were largely silenced so that God's voice could be heard.

But what was the message of the voice? We will see more of this next week, but quite simply John was **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. The voice doesn't challenge the powers and authorities of the day, even though Jesus would by word and deed do that. It didn't have a message that all was well, but that to prepare for the Lord there needed to be a spiritual cleansing, and spring clean, and that begins with repentance – turning back to God, and the ceremonial washing or baptism that outwardly expressed that. This is not the same as the baptism by which we become members of the people of God, and receive the Holy Spirit, but is a baptism of repentance.

And somehow crowds went out into the desert place to not only find the voice, but to listen to a message that said they needed to change; they needed to own up to their sins, and needed to turn back to God. Up until now only Gentiles who wanted to be followers of Jehovah /Yahweh had to undergo baptism; Jews didn't. The voice is saying that that has to change; *everyone* needs to be baptised which involved repentance if they are to be forgiven their sins. I wonder how many people were disappointed when they heard this message; they must have wanted a message that talked about the evil politicians or overlords of the day, or found someone to blame for the crisis the country was facing. But no, John's message was don't look for others to blame - "You need to change" Be humble enough to admit that that problem begins with each individual, and not blame the government, or society, politicians or the wealthy, migrants or refugees, fat-cat executives or the media.

Many years ago you may have heard there was correspondence in The Times newspaper about what was wrong with the world. Many

people wrote in with their scapegoats. I believe the correspondence ended when GK Chesterton wrote simply two words. "I am". That was the radical yet simple message of the voice in the wilderness. We are the problem, and we need God's forgiveness, and his help to change. But it begins with admitting it.

This is because repentance is the way paths are made straight, and every valley and hill made low, and rough roads made smooth so that the Lord may come. Repentance, turning back to God, not just saying sorry, but seeking to live differently, is the way that prepares for the Kingdom of God coming.

This Advent will we hear the message of the Voice? And can we in some way be the voice to those in our circles, who otherwise might miss the message of Advent and Christmas, not in a way that apportions blame, but in a way that shows we have heard the message – even in our desert place - and are seeking to turn back to God, and follow the babe born in Bethlehem?

Of all the competing voices we listen to each day, which Voice will we heed this Advent?

LUP

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for sending John to be the Voice in the wilderness, to listen to your word and to proclaim it fearlessly. Help us listen to his message, and to live lives of repentance, always turning back to you whenever we know we have drifted away from your will for our lives. And help us so live before others that they are attracted to you, as the crowds were to John, and help us point to you by our

Luke 3:1-6

All Saints Highgate

5.12.21

words and deeds. This we ask to the glory of God the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen